



**Director of  
Central  
Intelligence**

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# **Soviet Military Forces in the Far East**

**National Intelligence Estimate  
Memorandum to Holders**

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*NIE 11-14/40-81*

*October 1985*

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## MEMORANDUM TO HOLDERS

NIE 11-14/40-81

### SOVIET MILITARY FORCES IN THE FAR EAST

Information available as of 3 October 1985 was used in the preparation of this Memorandum to Holders, which was approved by the National Foreign Intelligence Board on that date.

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### SCOPE NOTE

This Memorandum to Holders updates NIE 11-14/40-81, published in September 1981. The basic judgments of that study remain sound. The Memorandum outlines recent major trends in the region and provides information on Soviet ground, air, naval, and strategic missile forces deployed over the past three and a half years.

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## DISCUSSION

1. NIE 11-14/40-81, "Soviet Military Forces in the Far East," was published in September 1981. Although there have been developments since the Estimate was published, the basic judgments remain sound. The Key Judgments stated:

- "The Far East is second only to the European theater in importance for Soviet military policy."
- Over the last several years the emphasis on the two theaters as reflected in force modernization has, if anything, shifted slightly more toward Europe. Soviet policy has been preoccupied with countering NATO plans for nuclear modernization. Chinese and other regional developments have posed no comparable new threats in the Far East. Frequent leadership turnover coupled with European developments may have prevented Moscow from reassessing its strategy to meet what is perceived as a less urgent threat from the East.
- "... the long, slender supply line, the Trans-Siberian Railroad, is dangerously close to a hostile China—hence vulnerable to attack and disruption."
- Though still true, the Soviets have made considerable progress on the Baikal-Amur-Main-line (BAM), which will alleviate total reliance on the Trans-Siberian east of Lake Baikal. When the BAM becomes operational in the late 1980s, it will increase rail capacity by 50 percent (see figure 1).
- "Although the Soviet military position in the Far East is now reasonably secure, the Soviets probably see growing challenges. They observe no basic change in China's hostile posture toward the USSR, and at the same time see intensified US pressure on Japan to assume a greater security role in Northeast Asia, evolving Sino-Japanese trade and political ties inimical to Soviet goals, and an evolving US-Chinese military relationship directed specifically against the USSR. They have also seen a reaffirmation by the United States of its commitment to maintain sizable

forces in South Korea and to strengthen Seoul's political, economic, and military structure."

Most of the above judgments have been borne out by events of the last three and a half years. Today, Moscow has some reasons to hope for small-scale improvements, but its basic evaluation has not changed substantially since 1981:

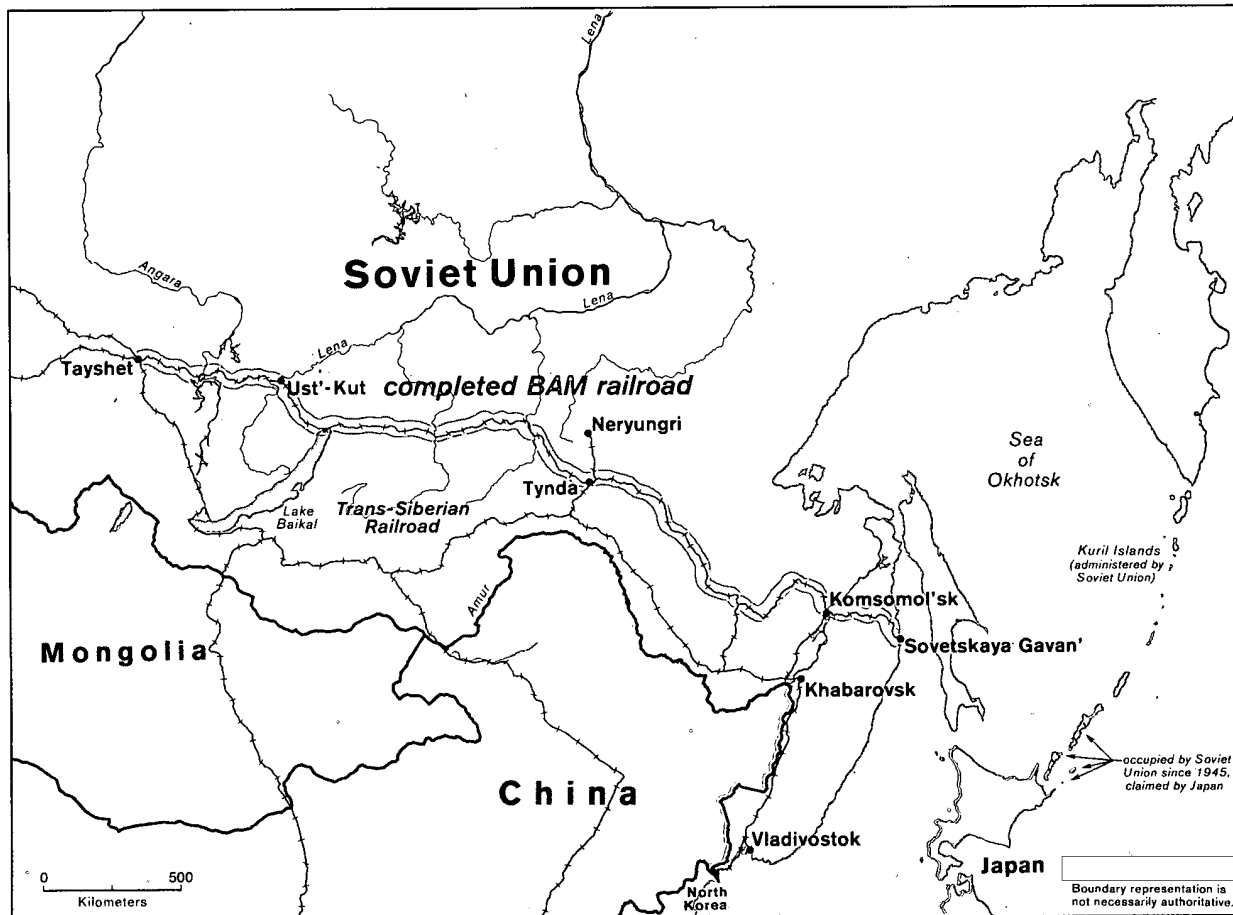
- The US commitments to regional powers—Japan, South Korea, and the member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—have been strengthened, and Moscow continues to warn of the dangers of a "Pacific NATO." Modernization of US air and naval forces, especially new submarine- and ship-launched cruise missiles, has continued. The Soviets probably recognize that as long as basic regional trends continue—including their own military buildup and the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia—many countries will continue to look to the United States for security assistance.
- Moscow may hope the United States will lose its military facilities in the Philippines as a result of deteriorating economic, social, and political conditions and the strong possibility Marcos will be replaced by a government more hostile to the United States. Moscow probably expects its attempts to increase access to the Philippines to bear more fruit in the future, as indicated in August 1985 by Manila's willingness—for the first time—to allow a Soviet merchant ship to be repaired at a shipyard south of Manila. The Soviets probably also hope to capitalize on the crisis in the Australia-New Zealand-US alliance, caused by New Zealand's "nonnuclear" policy, by encouraging anti-US attitudes among countries in the southern Pacific.
- Beijing still sees its northern neighbor as its main enemy, and continues to pursue an ostensibly nonaligned policy, but has also gradually expanded diplomatic and economic contacts

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**Figure 1**  
**Baikal-Amur Mainline Railroad (BAM)**



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with Moscow. (See Memorandum to Holders of NIE 13/11-84, *The Changing Sino-Soviet Relationship*, June 1985.) China's ties with Japan and the United States have increased, including expanded military cooperation symbolized by mutual visits by high-ranking military officers. The Soviets have refused to budge on the key issues—Afghanistan, Moscow's support for Vietnam, and Soviet forces near the Chinese border, especially in Mongolia—that the Chinese cite as "obstacles" to a significant improvement in relations. Moscow's own regional arms control proposals have won support only from their Asian allies.

- Japan has renewed long-term commitments to increase military spending and defend local sea lanes. Although Soviet-Japanese relations hit a new low following the Korean Airlines aircraft shootdown in September 1983, Moscow may be

encouraged by Japan's willingness over the past year to renew diplomatic exchanges.

- Moscow's support for Vietnam continues to sour relations with China and the ASEAN countries. Although there has been no repetition of the Sino-Soviet confrontation that accompanied China's punitive attack on Vietnam in 1979, tensions on the Sino-Vietnamese border have remained high. Largely as a result of this, since 1981 the Soviets have been allowed to expand Cam Ranh Bay into a major Third World base. It is now home for a variety of air and naval assets, including: 16 TU-16 medium-range bombers capable of striking South China, the Philippines, and strategic sea lanes; up to eight TU-95 and TU-142 long-range reconnaissance and antisubmarine warfare (ASW) aircraft; a squadron of 14 MIG-23 interceptors; and an average of 20 to 30 naval vessels,

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including nuclear-powered submarines and guided-missile surface ships (see figure 2). In the event of a regional crisis, the facilities at Cam Ranh Bay make it possible for the Soviets to expand their military assets quickly.

- Moscow appears to have gained ground in the perennial jockeying with Beijing for influence over North Korea. A visit in November 1984 by Deputy Foreign Minister Kapitsa reportedly resulted in a military agreement, and was followed by unprecedented joint reconnaissance-collection missions by Soviet aircraft—both TU-16s and TU-95s—and the introduction of MIG-23 fighters. These were the first aircraft deliveries since the early 1970s, and may ultimately be built up to a regiment of 40 aircraft. Closer ties with P'yongyang serve to remind the Chinese of Moscow's determination to have a say in the future of the Peninsula, and give the Soviets valuable opportunities to collect intelligence over the Yellow Sea.

2. The Kremlin's response to these developments has been to try to intimidate countries in the region by continuing to build up its military, especially its power-projection and theater nuclear capabilities:

- Since 1981 the Soviets have added three active divisions and a new type of army corps, and have extensively upgraded their combat support—including improved short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs)—and rear services structure for the force.
- The Pacific Ocean Fleet's capabilities have been increased with more capable surface ships, including a second Kiev-class aircraft carrier. In 1982 two Y-class nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) were shifted to patrols in the Sea of Japan but were subsequently transferred to the eastern Pacific—off the US coast—as part of the “analagous response” to NATO deployment of Pershing and cruise missiles in Europe. From the Sea of Japan, Y-class SSBNs could be used against China and against US targets as far away as the Philippines. Two regiments of naval TU-22 Backfires—40 aircraft—are now stationed in the Far East to threaten US carrier battle groups and military bases. In addition, the deployment of newer D-class SSBNs capable of striking the continental United States from launch positions in the north-west Pacific and the Sea of Okhotsk has led to

increased emphasis on defending home waters. In the Kuril Islands, coastal defense cruise missiles have been deployed, and a small naval support facility on Shimushir Island in the central Kurils has also been improved.

- The first SS-20 intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs) in the Far East were deployed in 1977. Since 1981 the Soviets have deployed 72 launchers in the Far East and deactivated all SS-20 bases in the central USSR. The force in the region now totals 162 launchers capable of carrying 486 warheads.<sup>1</sup> These launchers enable the Soviets to threaten more of the growing number of sensitive military targets in China.

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Some of the Far Eastern SS-20s can also strike Japan and the northern Philippines (see figure 3).

- An additional 40 Backfires have been deployed with Soviet Air Forces near the Chinese border. The Bear bomber regiment at Ukraina is being upgraded with the Bear G carrying the AS-4, and these aircraft—as well as the Bear H carrying the AS-15 air-launched cruise missile based at Dolon in the central USSR—have exercised in the Pacific area.

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- 1983 upgrade of Far East air defenses began with the deployment of MIG-23s to a former MIG-21 regiment in the Kurils.

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- 1985, in addition to other improvements the Soviets had deployed MIG-31s with regiments on Sakhalin Island and at Petropavlovsk.

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- The improvements are concentrated on units assigned to Pacific defenses rather than on those along the Chinese border.

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- Since the Air Force reorganization of 1980, Frontal Aviation in the Far East has improved its ground-attack capabilities by deploying a new regiment, now being reequipped with SU-17 fighter-bombers. Another regiment is being converted to SU-24 light bombers, bringing the

<sup>1</sup> These numbers reflect the recent completion of one base at Kansk and the deactivation of one SS-20 regiment at Novosibirsk in August.

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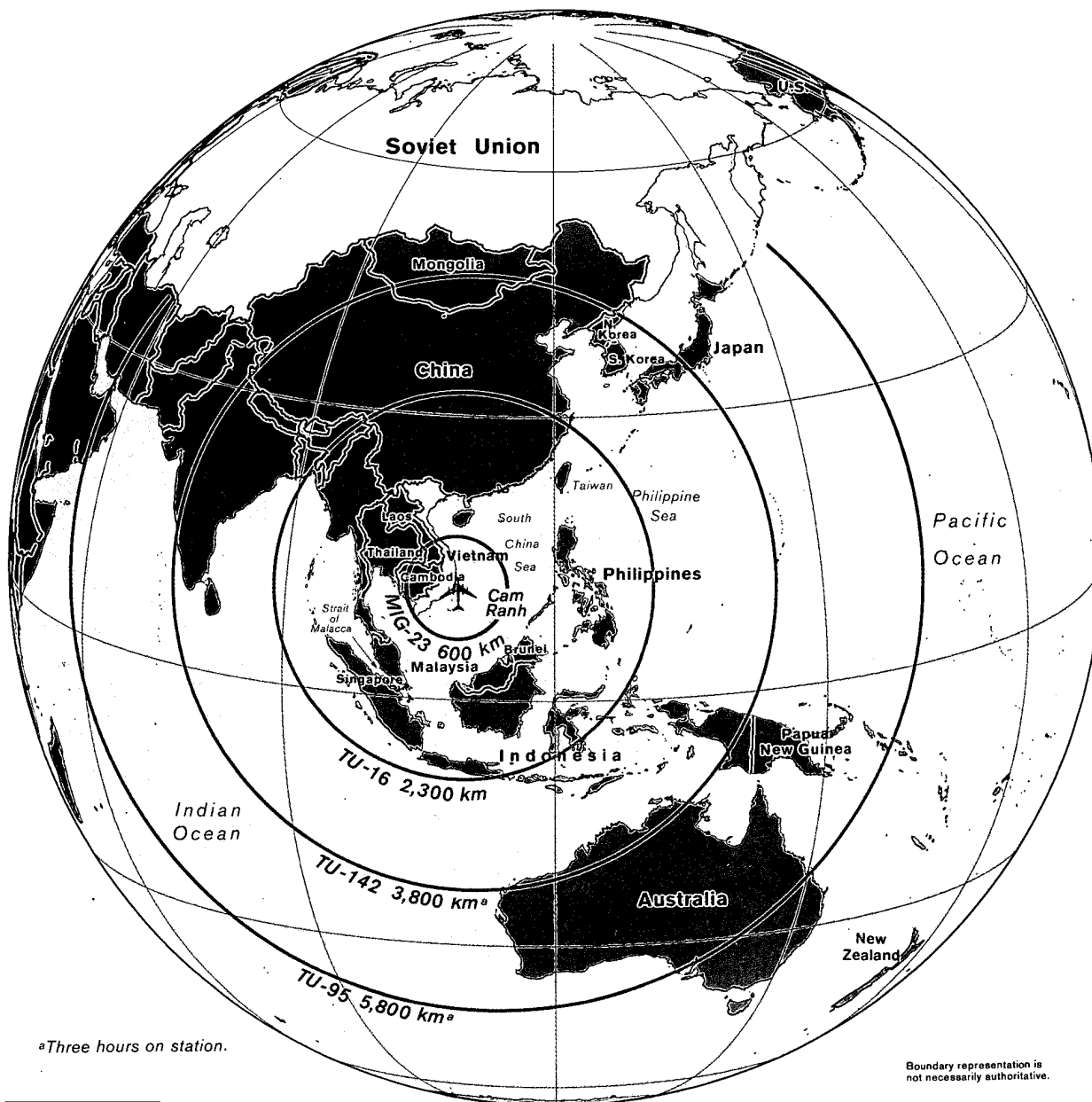
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**Figure 2**  
**Soviet Naval Air Coverage From Vietnam**



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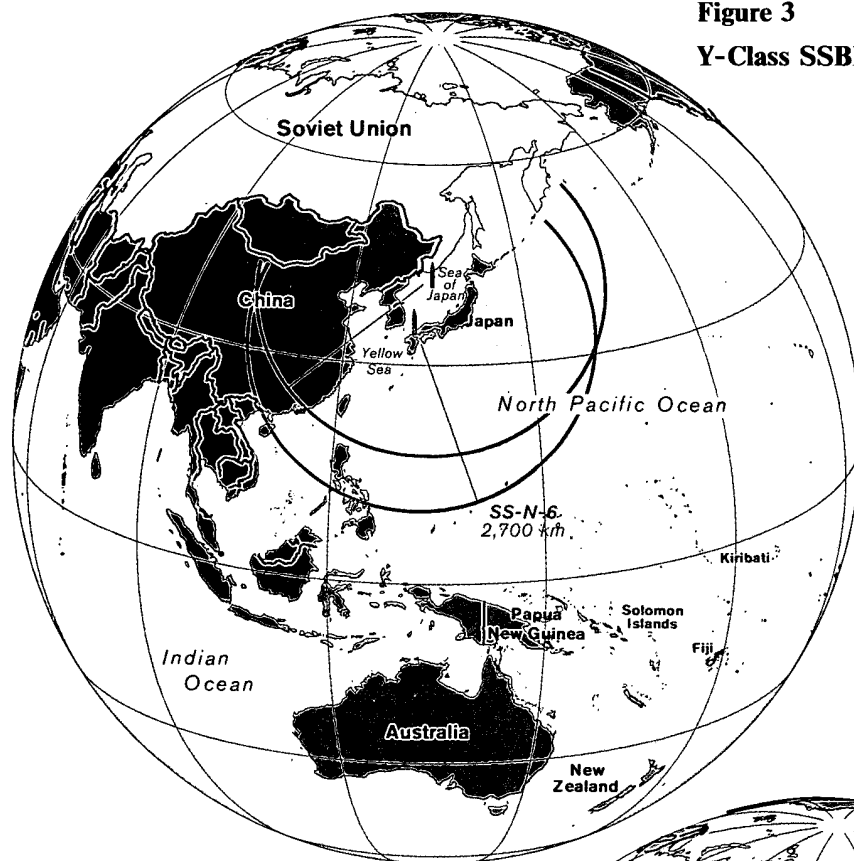
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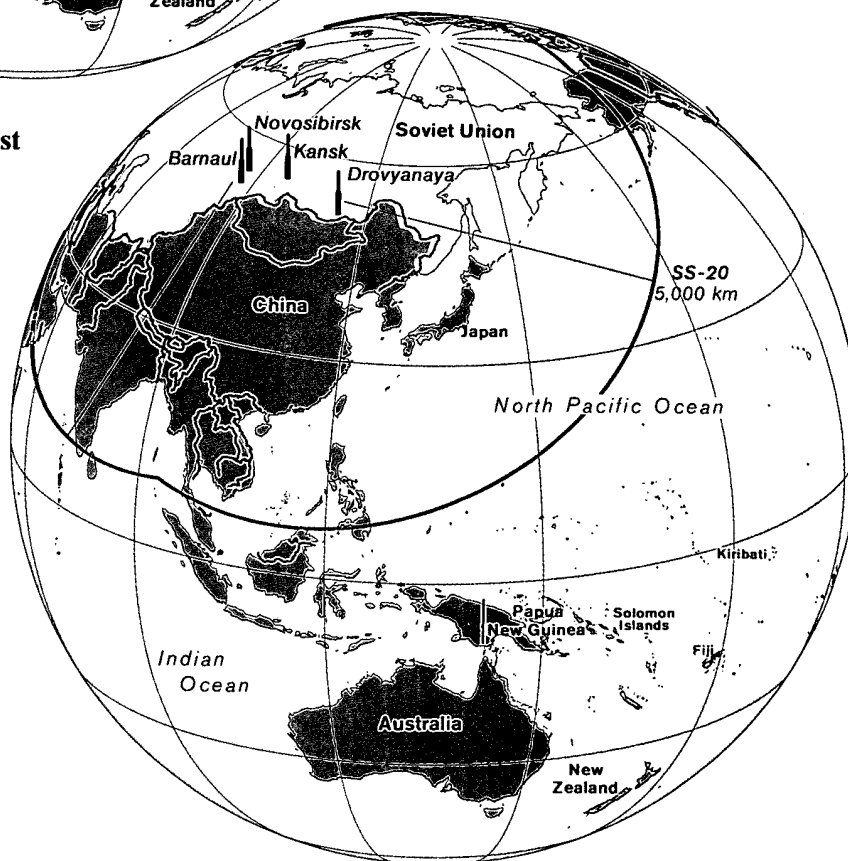
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Figure 3

## Y-Class SSBN Coverage in the Far East



## SS-20 Coverage in the Far East



Boundary representation is not necessarily authoritative.

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number of Fencer regiments along the border to eight. Three former fighter regiments have been assigned a new primary mission of ground attack.

- Since 1981 the number of attack helicopters—primarily MI-24s—has increased by almost 30 percent. Each active Ground Force division is being equipped with a squadron of general purpose, assault, and attack helicopters. [REDACTED]

3. Further improvements over the next few years will probably include deployment of Flanker (SU-27), Fulcrum (MIG-29), and additional advanced Foxhound (MIG-31) fighters with a lookdown/shootdown capability; sea- and air-launched cruise missiles; and possibly a third naval Backfire regiment. After 1995 a large aircraft carrier, possibly with conventional take-off and landing (CTOL) aircraft, could become operational with the Pacific Fleet. These improvements would greatly expand the reach of Soviet conventional and nuclear power, primarily to counter the growing capabilities of US Pacific forces and as a hedge against Chinese force improvements. [REDACTED]

4. [REDACTED] have not indicated changes in the basic Soviet approach to fighting a war against China or other regional powers. Soviet forces presently in place continue to possess the capability to stop any Chinese offensive and to mount limited offensives into northern China. A major offensive, to include seizing and holding Beijing, could be undertaken if substantial reinforcements were available or with the use of nuclear weapons. In most circumstances, however, it is unlikely Moscow would

commit substantial strategic reserves because of its preoccupation with NATO. If they advanced deep into China, Soviet Ground Forces would face a well-entrenched and numerically superior enemy at the end of long and tenuous supply lines. The Soviet Navy would probably concentrate on defending close-in bastions and other sea-control/sea-denial areas out to approximately 2,000 kilometers, but would be unlikely to allocate significant resources for open-ocean operations beyond these areas.<sup>2</sup> Naval air and submarine forces, however, would pose a significant threat to US naval bases, and to carrier task forces as they approach the Soviet Union. [REDACTED]

5. The reorganization of Soviet Air and Air Defense Forces beginning in 1980 gave Far East authorities direct control over elements of both forces. All medium bombers and nearly half of the light bombers in the Far East are now part of the 30th Air Army—headquartered at Irkutsk—which is controlled by the Supreme High Command. In wartime, however, most of these assets would probably be allocated to the Far East High Command for missions in the theater. [REDACTED]

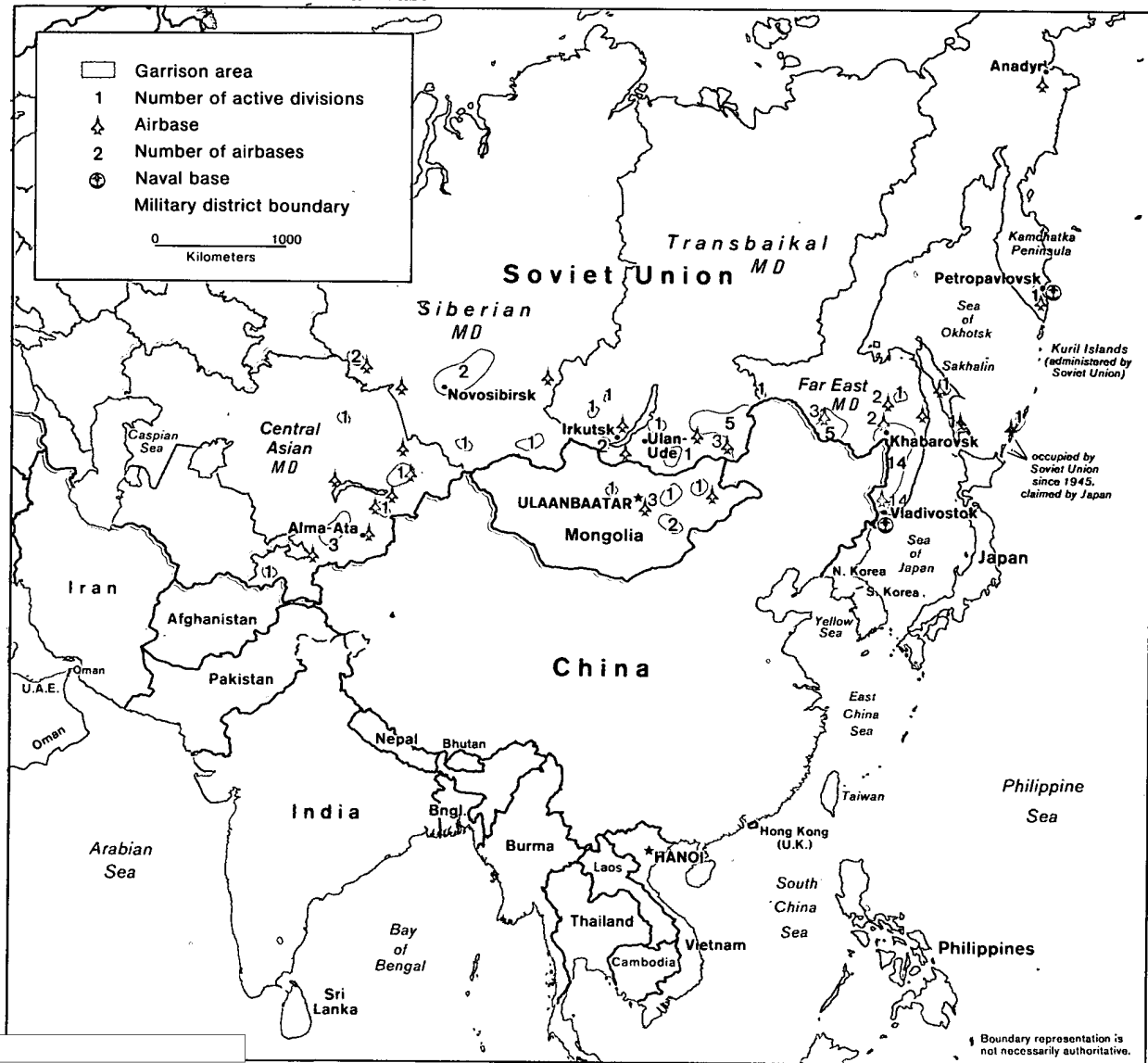
6. Although the evidence is unclear, the Far East High Command could control theater-committed strategic forces at various stages of a war, particularly if communications were disrupted with Moscow. [REDACTED]

<sup>2</sup> For additional discussion, see NIE 11-15-84, *Soviet Naval Strategy and Programs Through the 1990s*, March 1985. (u)

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**Figure 4**  
**Soviet Theater Forces in the Far East**



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25X1**Soviet Order of Battle in the Far East**

	Total		Total
<b>Ground Forces</b>		<b>Pacific Ocean Fleet</b>	
Active divisions <sup>a</sup>	54	<b>Ships</b>	
Tank	7	Nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines	25
Motorized rifle	47	Nonnuclear ballistic missile submarines	7
Personnel	490,000	General purpose submarines	90
Medium tanks	14,000	Command and control submarines	2
<b>Air Forces</b>		Vertical takeoff and landing aircraft carriers	2
Fixed wing	1,997	Principal surface combatants	81
Bombers	112	Amphibious warfare ships	20
Fighters	725	<b>Aircraft</b>	
Attack	905	Long-range strike aircraft	108
Reconnaissance/electronic countermeasures	255	Fighter-bombers	35
Helicopters	1,310	Vertical takeoff and landing fighters	41
Attack	440	Long-range reconnaissance and electronic warfare aircraft	59
Heavy lift transport	115	Long-range antisubmarine warfare aircraft	25
General purpose	315	Medium-range antisubmarine warfare aircraft	53
Assault	440	Naval helicopters	106

<sup>a</sup> These figures exclude several mobilization division bases and one new type army corps composed of brigades. Four divisions—one in the northeastern USSR, two on Sakhalin Island, and one coastal defense division on the Kuril Islands—are included in the total but are not stationed opposite China.

Soviet forces along the border maintain various levels of peacetime strength. About 45 percent of the divisions in the Far East are manned at over half of their wartime strength and have a full complement of combat equipment. Other active divisions have lower manpower and equipment levels. An extensive mobilization of forces, including rear services, would be required for the Soviet Union to engage in major offensive operations against China.

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